

Record TV shows with an ‘online VCR’

Local firm comes up with service for users to record favourite shows over the Net. **ALFRED SIEW** reports

Want to watch the latest season of Desperate Housewives but keep missing the episodes because you are not home early enough? Buy a video recorder, friends will say. Sure, but now, there is a cheaper option – sign up for a free “online recorder” service that lets you watch the programmes later on a PC. Called RecordTV, the service lets users choose their favourite TV programmes and record them on an Internet server for viewing later. All that the user does is surf to www.recordtv.com, pick from a list of the day’s programmes and click to record. After the programme has aired, he can use his PC to play back the programme – like a video recorder. RecordTV chief executive officer Carlos Fernandes is confident the service will take off with Net-savvy users who are used to watching YouTube videos. “Instead of missing your favourite TV shows because you want to go out, you record what you would otherwise miss and see it when it is convenient to you,” he said. Earlier this month, he showed Digital Life a demo of the service, recording Channel 5 and Channel 8 programmes with a Net-connected laptop. Mr Fernandes set up his Singapore company after he and partner Varsha Jagdale bought over the assets of the similarly-named company in the United States for an undisclosed sum in February. The American RecordTV firm, founded in 1999, was embroiled in a damaging lawsuit with the content industry over copyright infringement in 2001, forcing it to stop the online VCR service. Mr Fernandes said his Singapore firm is free of the legal tangles of the past:



Mr Fernandes (left) set up RecordTv with Ms Varsha Jagdale, after buying over the assets of the similarly-named company in the United States. While the US firm was embroiled in a copyright lawsuit, Mr Fernandes foresees no such problems here.

“We did not buy the US-based RecordTV outright. We only bought its assets – including its trademarks and software.”

He is, nonetheless, careful to avoid a hefty lawsuit with the content industry. Only people accessing the Net from Singapore are allowed to watch channels

broadcasted here, since TV programmes are usually restricted geographically. At the same time, the RecordTV service records only free-to-air TV, so it does

not let users pirate pay-TV programmes. It also does not stream any live content. The company tunes in to several channels in the air, but only records a programme when a user clicks on it. This is the way the VCR works, said Mr Fernandes, except his service is over the Internet. Users will be able to sign up and store videos up to 30 days for free, for a start. The company also wants to license its technology to broadcasters as a value-added service, though this may take some convincing. Many broadcasters already have on-demand and recording features. SingTel, for example, will let users pause and record live TV with its new Internet TV service.

StarHub has a free personal video recorder service (though users have to buy a \$300 recorder), while MediaCorp lets viewers watch drama serials on its mobTV website. Audiences also have more choices now. Said undergraduate Cai Hui Jie, 20: “There are a lot of websites like PeekVid.com which let you watch dramas and comedies from around the world.” She added: “Why would you want to record programmes from Singapore only?”

VeohTV irks American television networks with its recording software

Mr Dmitry Shapiro brings an unlikely gadget into meetings these days: a TV remote control. As chief executive of Veoh Networks, an Internet video company based in San Diego, Mr Shapiro uses the remote to navigate the company’s new software program, VeohTV, on his laptop. The software acts like a Web browser but displays only Internet video, presenting full-length television shows and popular clips from the Web’s largest video sites, like NBC.com and YouTube. It lists those videos in a program guide and plays them in a small window or across the entire screen. The product, now in a private testing phase, will be available to the public later this year. It has the potential to be a popular and practical way to watch online video. But like a long line of other innovative high-tech tools, VeohTV could also threaten and alienate traditional media companies and even cause some of Veoh’s Internet rivals to consider legal remedies. For the last two years, Veoh Networks has operated a video-hosting website, Veoh.com. The site works much the way YouTube does, with a few notable exceptions. The company does not impose any time limits on the length of videos and does not use digital fingerprinting technology to filter out copyrighted material. That has led to some rights holders to complain that Veoh has fallen behind in protecting intellectual property. Nevertheless, Veoh.com has been growing fast: It draws about 15 million visitors a month, up from 4.5 million in January. Veoh Networks is a private company and does not release financial data. YouTube, by contrast, gets more



VeohTV, in the test phase, is a Web browser that shows TV programmes and clips.

than 100 million visitors and serves up more than three billion video clips a month, according to several market research firms. To support the new effort, the company raised about US\$26 million (S\$39.3 million) this summer from investors. The company introduced VeohTV as a beta product last month, making it available for testing to a group of invited users. I found VeohTV easy to use. Once the software is downloaded to a computer, it offers an easy-to-navigate directory of 114 video channels, including listings for CBS, NBC, Fox and YouTube. On the NBC channel, there are dozens of episodes of Heroes, 30 Rock and Studio 60 On The Sunset Strip. On the Fox channel, there are several full-length episodes of the dramas Bones and 24. Those shows are free and available for streaming on the NBC and Fox sites. The VeohTV player, Mr Shapiro said, is just giving them a new audience. “There are full-length episodes at Fox.com, but many customers don’t know how to find them,” he said. “The Web browser is fine for short clips. But if you just want to sit back and watch video on the Web, this is what you will want to use.” Major media companies, however, are more interested in protecting their copyrighted programs. Veoh does not ask for permission to play material from other websites, though Mr Shapiro says he wants to strike advertising-sharing deals with content owners to ensure that shows appear in high-quality video. But Veoh does not think that it needs consent because VeohTV is doing nothing more than playing what is already on-

line, including any commercials shown during the programmes. The networks may disagree. By only offering video, VeohTV omits all the other advertisements on the network sites. For example, people who watched an episode of Heroes on NBC.com two weeks ago also saw for 40 minutes a banner ad for McDonald’s on the same page. VeohTV users watching the same episode would not see the banner. Mr Rick Cotton, the executive vice-president and general counsel of NBC Universal, said that streaming full-length television episodes drives traffic to other parts of NBC’s site and exposes users to the ads on it. And the right to play those shows is valuable, he said, pointing to the still-unnamed venture between NBC Universal and News Corp. to create an online repository of their TV shows and movies. For some video content, VeohTV can act as a digital video recorder, turning a video stream — meant to be viewed on the Web — into a downloaded file on a user’s hard drive. VeohTV users can record a YouTube video, for example, even though YouTube, owned by Google, says its terms of service specify that videos uploaded to the site will only be streamed. Mr Shapiro and his backers are aware their product will disrupt current business models. Veoh hopes to build a large audience while courting large media companies. That creates an apparent contradiction that will be hard to resolve. “We are going to try to be friendly to content owners,” said Mr Todd Dagues, a partner at Spark Capital who serves on the Veoh board. “We are going to try to be the white-hat company.” – By Brad Stone, New York Times News Service

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